

Frequently Asked Questions About Commodity Specifications

1. What is a commodity specification?

A specification is a written description of a commodity, and it includes the specific requirements that the vendor must follow to meet the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) contract for producing and delivering our commodities. The commodity specifications are developed by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), and are used by the AMS and FSA Contracting Officers when they purchase foods which are distributed through our commodity assistance programs.

2. What information is contained in a specification?

A specification contains standards relating to the quality, appearance and delivery of the product: conditions under which it is to be grown or produced, packed, stored and transported; explicit descriptions regarding its size, weight, color and nutrient content; details of the inspection process; and specific packing and labeling requirements. All requirements for purchase of commodity products are included in the specification.

3. How is a specification developed?

Quite frequently AMS and FSA begin to develop a specification for a USDA commodity by using the [Commercial Item Description \(CID\)](#), if one is available. A CID is a simplified product description that concisely describes salient product characteristics of a commercial product. These CIDs are based on attributes which describe the odor, flavor, color, texture, analytical requirements, etc. for each product.

The government-wide Food Quality Assurance Program develops and manages all CIDs. Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides FSA and AMS with any special requirements for the item to be purchased. AMS and FSA will incorporate these requirements into the specification.

Special requirements are based on the needs and preferences of the recipients, such as nutritional requirements. Hence, USDA's specifications may be more stringent than what is required in a CID. In some cases, AMS or FSA use the CID without any changes.

4. Is a specification the same as an announcement?

No. An announcement is a document containing producers' requirements for bidding on USDA's commodities, such as billing requirements, shipping and delivery guidelines, contract information, and certifications, requirements and warranties. AMS and FSA contracting officers make the announcement available to prospective bidders.

Vendors use the information in announcements to determine their bid prices. The specification and announcement for commodities purchased by AMS are separate documents. The specification and announcement for commodities purchased by FSA are combined into one document.

5. Who uses specifications?

The AMS and FSA Contracting Offices distribute specifications to prospective bidders. The specifications are included in the announcements for the invitations for bids on the commodities purchased for our food distribution programs.

FNS makes the specifications available to its Regional Offices, which distribute them to State agencies. Regional Offices and State agencies use the specification as a reference document to answer questions and clarify details about the commodity, such as packaging requirements.

6. When might a specification be changed or amended?

Specific requirements are included in USDA's specifications to ensure that the producer will provide a quality and nutritious product that will be well accepted by recipients and meet their needs. However, in a few instances FNS may receive a complaint on a product that highlights the need to modify the specification to preclude future problems with the product.

Specifications may also be amended to reflect changes in USDA or Food and Drug Administration food safety and nutrition standards or regulations. When this is done, regions and State agencies are notified through an amendment to the specification.

7. How can I obtain a copy of a specification for a USDA commodity?

To obtain a copy of a USDA commodity specification, you may contact your [FNS Regional Office](#) or the Food Distribution Division's Program Support Team at FNS Headquarters.

We also suggest that you visit the [AMS Food Purchase Resources](#) web site for on-line information about commodity specifications that USDA uses in purchasing the following type foods for USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs:

- [Beef](#)
- [Chicken](#)
- [Fish](#)
- [Pork](#)
- [Turkey](#)
- [Fruits & Vegetables,](#)
[Juices, Nuts, Beans Corn](#)
[Syrup](#)